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Ball Playing at Rome

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In ancient Rome ball playing was not a major sport in any way comparable, for example, to the gladiatorial contests or the chariot races, yet it enjoyed a wide popularity both as a means of exercise and as a competitive sport. That a ball game could draw a large crowd of spectators and inspire them to noisy outbursts is revealed by Seneca's allusion (*Epist.* 80.1.2) to his being interrupted in his studies by the loud roar from a crowd watching a ball game (*sphaeromachia*) in the stadium close by.

Our information about balls and ball playing in Rome is sadly incomplete. This article will attempt to assemble and interpret such data as are available. A full collection of references can be assembled from the articles in the various encyclopedias and handbooks.¹

Whether or not the Romans got their knowledge of ball playing from the Greeks, it is clear that they were interested in it from comparatively early times. Plautus (*Curculio* 296) refers to slaves playing catch in the street, though, of course, this passage may come from his Greek original, and the authorities have assembled a formidable list of distinguished Romans who indulged in the game.² In his speech for Archias (13) Cicero indicates that he regarded ball playing, as well as various other forms of recreation, to be a waste of valuable time which he preferred to devote to serious studies. Similarly, Seneca (*De Brev. Vitae* 13.1), complaining of those who waste their days in idle activities, lists ball playing along with checkers (*latrunculi*) and acquiring a sun tan.

From numerous references it is clear that ball playing was a favorite medium of exercise, especially in the afternoon just prior to the daily bath, so that after the players had worked up a good sweat, they could immediately enter the bath chambers. It is a familiar fact that all but the smallest baths had a *palaestra* as part of the establishment and some had a separate ball court, known as a *sphaeristerium*. In his descriptions of his villas at Laurentum and in the Tuscan hills the younger Pliny specifically mentions the ball court as being attached to the baths (*Epist.* 2.17.11, 5.6.27). The philosopher Seneca, who had lodgings right above a bath, complains of the various noises, including the racket made by the ball player (*pilicrepus*) loudly counting the score (*Epist.* 56.1). Trimalchio played ball just before his bath (Petron. 27) and so did the elderly Spurinna, who, despite his seventy-seven years, took a long and strenuous workout with the ball prior to his bath and dinner (Pliny *Epist.* 3.1.8).

Three passages in Martial (7.32, 12.82, 14.163) speak

of playing ball as a preliminary to bathing. In one he praises the young scholar Atticus, who prepares for the bath not with the *pila* or *follis* or *paganica* or the strenuous game of *harpasta* or other violent exercise, but by running for a stretch along the Aqua Virgo or in the Porticus of Europa. In another place he describes the unescapable pest Menogenes at the baths, where, in the hope of getting an invitation to dinner, he helps the ball players, even fetching the balls out of the dust, although he has already bathed and put on his sandals. In a third passage Martial calls on the ball player to quit playing, for the bell announcing that the hot baths are ready has just sounded and, if he tarries, he will have to do his bathing in the unheated Aqua Virgo.

Since there is no indication that the Romans used any bat or racket or other implement to strike the ball, games resembling our baseball, cricket, and tennis were necessarily unknown to them. To propel a ball they either threw it or struck it with the hand.

The simplest form of ball playing was a game of catch with two or more persons participating. The Latin expression for this seems to have been *datatim ludere*. I have already cited the passage in Plautus' *Curculio* on slaves playing catch in the street. The expression *expulsim ludere* refers to striking the ball with the hand. It is found just once, in a quotation from Varro (in Nonius 104.28), who refers to boys in the forum at Rome playing ball *expulsim* in front of the butcher stalls. One could also play by bouncing the ball against a wall or on the ground, although, before the days of rubber, the balls could not have had much resilience.

Ball players were called *pilicrepi*. A painted election notice in Pompeii (C.I.L. 4.1147) urges the *pilicrepi* to support A. Vettius Firmus for the office of aedile. A Pompeian graffito (C.I.L. 4.1926) comments scornfully on one Epaphra as no ball player (*Epaphra pilicrepi non est*).

We know the names of four kinds of balls, alluded to by Martial in four consecutive couplets of his book of *Apophoreta* (numbered Book 14 of the *Epigrams*), which consists of elegiac couplets to be attached to gifts distributed at dinner parties. Successively (14.45-48), he refers to the *pila paganica*, the *pila trigonalis*, the *follis*, and the *harpasta*. Since Martial is one of our principal sources of information on this topic, it will be worth while to translate these couplets in full:

Pila paganica. The *paganica*, which swells with bothersome feathers, is less ample than the *follis* and less compact than the *pila*.

Pila trigonalis. If you have the skill to strike me with nimble blows of the left hand, I am yours. Oh, you don't? You rube, return the ball.

Follis. Keep away, young men; the gentle time of life is suited to me. With the *follis* children may properly play, or old men.

Harpasta. This ball is grabbed in the dust of Antaeus by the swift athlete, who thickens his neck with useless labor. From these four couplets we learn that the *follis* was the largest ball, next came the *paganica*, then the *trigonalis*, and the smallest, apparently, and most compact was the *harpasta*. We learn also that the *paganica* was stuffed with feathers, that the *trigonalis* was struck with the left hand, that the *follis* was used in less vigorous games, such as were suitable for children and old men, and that the *harpasta* involved a strenuous, dusty game which tended to develop the neck. Evidence from the other sources bears out this information from Martial's couplets. We may now take up the data as they supplement these four types of balls and the games in which they were used.

About the *paganica* we have no information except that it was stuffed with feathers and was the second largest ball. On the game which was played with this ball there are no data whatsoever.

The *follis* also may be dismissed with few words because of our lack of information. It was a large, air-filled ball, possibly the size of a basketball. It may have been an inflated bladder with an integument. Martial refers to its feather-light weight (*plumea pondera*, 4.19.7) and, as we have just seen, to its suitability for those who preferred a less strenuous form of exercise. Whether it was just thrown around from hand to hand or used for some kind of team play, like our volley ball, is not revealed through any source.

With regard to the materials of which the other commonly used balls, the *trigonalis* and the *harpasta*, were composed, we have no data. The stuffing may have been hair. That hair was used for stuffing balls is clear from a metrical riddle by Symphosius (quoted in *Anthologia Latina*, ed. Riese, 1.1.236.59):

Non sum cincta comis et non sum compta capillis.
Intus enim crines mihi sunt, quos non videt ullus.
Meque manus mittunt manibusque remittor in auras.
With no hair am I crowned nor with tresses bedight.
My hair is within me, concealed from all sight.
Hands send me, and smitten by hand I take flight.

The answer to this riddle is, obviously, a hair-stuffed ball. The integument of the ball consisted of pieces of cloth, sometimes in color, or leather, stitched together.

Our information about the game of *trigon* is somewhat more extensive, although far from complete. As its name indicates, it was played by three persons standing, presumably, so as to form the corners of a triangle. Since there are more references to this game than to any other type of ball game, especially as a preliminary to bathing, it is not unlikely that the expression *pila ludere*, when not otherwise qualified, refers to the *trigon*. Thus Horace (*Sat.* 1.5.48f), in describing his trip to Brundisium, states that at Capua, while Maecenas played ball, he and Virgil took a nap, because ball playing is not suitable for those with sore eyes (i.e. Horace) and weak stomachs (i.e. Virgil). In the next Satire (1.6.126) Horace again refers to his aversion to ball playing, this time specifically mentioning the *trigon* as a game which he avoids in the hot afternoon. He did, however, sometimes play ball in the Campus Martius with Maecenas (*Sat.* 2.6.49).

Martial's epithet of *tepidus*, twice applied to the *trigon* (4.19.5, 12.82.3), implies that it was rather a

heating game and therefore suitable for working up a sweat before the bath. It was apparently played naked, as Martial's *de trigone nudo* (7.72.9) would indicate. A spirited, well-played game would cause others in the *palaestra* to suspend their own exercises to watch the players, ready to applaud displays of unusual skill. This readily follows from Martial's expression of good wishes to Paulus (7.72.9ff), to whom, he hopes, the favor of the oil-besmeared crowd will give the palm for the naked *trigon* and not even accord greater praise to the left-handed strokes of Polybius.

From this last statement in Martial and a few other references it is clear that a skillful use of the left hand was essential to a good *trigon* player. In one of the epigrams cited above Martial states that one who cannot strike the ball with a nimble left hand should give back the ball and not even try to play. We need not, however, conclude, as do some of the authorities, that the left hand was used exclusively in this game. If, for instance, we were to encounter the statement in a modern writer that there is no use in trying to play tennis unless you have a good backhand, we should certainly not have to assume that all tennis strokes are backhanded. So, in the *trigon*, the player must be equally skilled with both hands.

From the use of the verb *expulsare* (Martial 14.46) it appears that in the *trigon* the ball was struck with the hand rather than caught. It is hard to say whether more than one ball was kept going simultaneously between the three players. A fresco found at the Baths of Titus shows four men, one of them elderly and bearded, playing with balls. The older man is usually interpreted as the trainer, though he may well be the scorer or even one of the players. Six balls are being used, but how they were manipulated does not appear. The poses seem to indicate that the men are juggling the balls rather than throwing or striking them at each other in some form of competitive game. The fresco is commonly regarded as an illustration of the *trigon*, but this must remain highly uncertain.

If the game which Trimalchio played prior to the bath (Petron. 27.3) is the *trigon*, as I think probable, it appears that the ball was struck back and forth by hand between the players:

(pilae) inter manus lusu expellente vibrabant

Trimalchio's method of scoring only those balls which fell to the ground rather than those struck successfully is described as a novelty, so that we may plausibly gather that the normal practice was to score the successful hits. That this method of scoring could be a noisy and continual process, as in the case of our game of ping pong, is obvious from Seneca's reference, cited above (*Epist.* 56.1). The Menogenes mentioned by Martial (12.82) as trying to get a dinner invitation by butting into a game of *trigon* is represented as reaching for the ball with right and left hand and scoring the successful strokes to the credit of the prospective host.

The most spirited and strenuous of all ball games was, beyond question, the *harpasta*. The name, which occurs in either the singular form *harpastum* or the plural *harpasta*, is applied to both ball and game. The four references to the game in Martial (4.19.6, 7.32.10, 7.67.4, 14.48), the only extant Latin writer to mention

it, at least by name, indicate that it was a dusty game, played with a small, compact ball, that it required much moving about, and served to develop the neck. The woman Philaenis, whom Martial represents as playing the game with her dress hiked up (*subligata*), is characterized as a super-tomboy, so that we need not be misled into thinking that there was anything ladylike about this game. In referring to the *harpasta* Martial thrice uses the verb *rapere*, which is the equivalent of the Greek ἀρπάζειν, whence the game derived its name.

The *harpasta* was, in fact, a Greek game, and much of what we know about it is derived from Greek sources. The fullest description is to be found in Athenaeus (1.14F), from whom we learn that at an earlier time it was called *phaeninda*, that it was violent and exhausting, involved much twisting and turning of the neck, passing of the ball from player to player, feinting in one direction and throwing in another, knocking the ball from an opponent's hand, eliciting from the spectators such shouts as "Out of bounds," "Too far," "Past him," "Over his head," "On the ground," "Up in the air," "Too short," "Pass it back in the scrimmage."³

This was clearly a game played by two teams, although it is impossible to tell how many were on a side. If a relief found in 1922 at the Ceramicus in Athens has been correctly interpreted as representing a game of *harpasta*, there were, at least in that instance, three men on a side. One youth, holding a ball about the size of a baseball, is shown at the extreme left, poised as though about to throw; the others are so grouped that one is about to block the thrower, one is poised to block the expected recipient, who stands as though ready to catch the throw, one is watching the ball so that he can leap into the play where he will do the most good, and a sixth, at the extreme right, indicates by a signal that the ball is unexpectedly to be thrown to him. Except for the size of the ball, the set-up closely resembles our game of basketball.

I think it probable that the *sphaeromachia* to which Seneca refers (*Epist.* 80.1-3) as attracting a large and noisy crowd in the stadium was the *harpasta*. Seneca testifies to the brawny muscles of the players, to the blows and kicks and bloody wounds which they suffered as they were knocked over and trampled on while playing their rough and tumble game in the hot sand under the blazing sun. In Justinian's *Digest* (9.2.52.4) a legal question of damages is raised in connection with an injury to a slave boy whose leg was broken in a rough game of this sort.

There is a lively description of a ball game in one of the letters of Apollinaris Sidonius (5.17.7), a bishop of Gaul in the fifth century. While one would scarcely be justified in using a practice of fifth-century Gaul to illustrate Roman customs of a much earlier period, it is not impossible that, as G. E. Marindin thinks,⁴ the game described by Sidonius was the *harpasta*. It was indeed a rough game, and a certain *vir illustris*, Filimatus, overestimating his powers, since he was no longer so young and vigorous as of yore, was repeatedly bowled over and so badly shaken up that he was forced to retire from the play.

After assembling all these data about the game of *harpasta*, we are in the situation of one who has put

together all the available pieces of his jigsaw puzzle, only to find that a number of essential parts are missing. Thus, we do not know how many men played on each side, nor how the ball was put into play, nor whether the ball had to be continually passed from player to player or whether one could run with it, nor how the points were scored. It would seem that the objective was to get over the baseline of the opposing team, as in our football, but, if so, whether the ball had to be passed over such a line or carried over or thrown over, or whether there was something like the basket in our basketball, is entirely unknown. Nor can we tell whether the ball was dead when it touched the ground or could be retrieved on the first bounce, as Marindin states.

Thus, while it is not possible with the available evidence to reconstruct a single type of ball game which the Romans played, we do have enough information to realize that, next to the major professional contests, ball playing engaged the interest of the Romans more than any other form of outdoor sport. This was, at least, a field of sport in which the ordinary Roman could himself participate and enjoy both the personal competition and the physical well-being which resulted therefrom.

¹ See especially in Pauly-Wissowa's *Real-Encyclopädie des klassischen Altertums-wissenschaft* the articles "Ballspiel" expulsum "follis" "harpastum" "sphaeromachia" "sphaeristerium."

² E.g. the augur Scaevola, the younger Cato, Caesar, Augustus, Maecenas, Marcus Aurelius, Alexander Severus.

³ For these ejaculations I have followed the interpretations in C. B. Gulick's translation in the Loeb series.

⁴ "The Game of 'Harpastum' or 'Phaininda'" in *Classical Review* 4 (1890). 145-149. Making use primarily of this passage from Sidonius and Galen's treatise "On Exercise With the Small Ball," Marindin reconstructs a lively game, but many of his details are hardly justified by the evidence.

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The Humane Tradition

The humanities are those subjects which treat man as transcendent.

The basic elements in the tradition are two streams—the Greco-Roman or Classical and the Hebrew-Christian or Biblical. The wide influence of these streams is found in the names of people: Isaac, Joseph, Mary, Irene, Julius, Mark, and the like. The two are forcefully illustrated in Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant.

What is it that the Classical tradition contributed which is essential to the continuance of the humane tradition? The idea of cosmos—that this is a world of order, of laws discoverable by the exercise of human reason. To this the Stoics added the concept that not only the world of nature was a world of law but also the world of man. They developed the idea of one world—the cosmopolis or world city. It was Athens, then Rome.

When this philosophy permeated Rome, it led to the further concept that all men must live under substantially the same law. This attitude that men must live under law was a creation not of the theorists but of very practical men—the Romans. They had a Roman Empire, a world empire. They were confronted with the fact that only Romans were justifiable under Roman Law. Yet Rome was, and they recognized that it was, a cosmopolis, a city of the world. They knew that Gauls, Germans, Spaniards, Syrians and others must be amenable to law but could not be brought under the laws of Roman citizenship. They said there must be law for these also and so established a special judgeship where cases involving foreigners could be tried. This they called the *praetor peregrinus*, the justice having jurisdiction over foreigners.

This court was charged with the problem, "What is the common denominator of law in the case of this man who is an Italian, and that man who is a Syrian?" A similar situation faces U. N. and some solution will have to be found. The Romans came to the conclusion that the greatest common denominator was found in natural rights, which they called *ius gentium*, the law governing nations. Because men are persons they have certain natural rights which must be respected at all times by all peoples under all circumstances.

All of this is found in Cicero who was intimately acquainted with the Stoic development of the humane tradition. The signers of the Declaration of Independence knew their Cicero and understood the tradition. It was incorporated by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence and the rights as there formulated by Jefferson could well be used as the charter of the U. N.

Christianity added to this concept. Rome was not

only a city of the world, but a city of God. The Christian attitude toward the worthwhileness of the person as a child of God deepened the concept.

In spite of our attachment to these principles, our education has departed more and more from them. We have been teaching history and literature in a way that tends to make them unique and incommensurable, as if the important thing about them was American and Colonial English or German or French or Russian. We have overnationalized these subjects. Any piece of literature that is worth studying is so because it reveals certain aspects of human experience.

A survey of great literature reveals that fact. Don Quixote is great literature not because it is written in Spanish but because it is so human. Likewise Peter Ibbetsen. Hamlet is great not because Shakespeare was English but because it presents a picture of human life we recognize as fundamentally true not of the English, but of all men.

Therefore if we are to maintain the humane tradition and make it function in this world of change we must emphasize those things which are fundamental and central in our tradition. Science has functioned internationally because it is the greatest cooperative the world has ever seen. Yet culturally we are now more isolationist than we were before the war. If we emphasize our uniqueness, and the other nations do likewise, we are moving in the wrong direction.

We need to maintain the fundamental concept of the humane tradition as it was known to our fathers and as it was phrased so strikingly by George Washington: "I am a citizen of the great republic of humanity at large."

(*Precis of an Address by Dean Christian Gauss of Princeton—1946, submitted by Chas. A. Tonsor.*)

Ancient Satires to Modern Cartoons

James Russell Lowell once said that to read a classic was like reading a commentary from the morning newspaper. This remark is especially pertinent to the satires of Juvenal and Horace. One of the most interesting features of our modern newspapers and magazines is the editorial cartoon. So important are these cartoons that no newspaper and but few magazines dare omit them. The publishers are well aware that the omission of them means the cutting in half of their subscription list. In fact the cartoonist of today is a highly paid professional whose position is as secure as a rock in the uncertain world of journalism.

Yet there are few modern readers who realize that these cartoonists are merely the successors of the ancient satirists who in their own day held the same high position. Actually the moderns have merely bottled the old wine of satire in a new bottle—the cartoon.

The world of today is, after all, a very old world. It is a stage on which the old actors are always reappearing in altered costumes. But it is still the same world with the same vices and the same misunderstandings. In other words the subject matter for satire is just as present today as it always was. Hence the Satirists, like the poor, will always be with us. These satirists are men who turn a searchlight on man's failings and illuminate them so that all men may see them and be ashamed of them. Satirists of all ages have but

one aim—the reform of morals by making vice seem ridiculous.

Centuries ago a Horace and a Juvenal hurled a barrage of attacks against the vices and faults of ancient Rome. Today modern Horaces and Juvenals in the clothing of cartoonists take up the weapons of their predecessors. The moderns have the same intention in their satires but they have added a dash of freshness to the old wine. They have transformed the graphic word pictures of the ancient literary satire into the more graphic line drawing of the cartoon. The humor and ridicule no longer depend on words but on the exaggerated line drawn caricature of the person or class of persons in question. All of us have laughed at the overdone physical traits of some politician or type figure representing a banker or social climber. Yet despite the exaggerated drawing the essential identity of the person or persons is retained and the particular point of the cartoon is not missed. They bring in humor as did the ancients and like the ancients it serves its purpose. It makes vice ridiculous. The cartoonists have bottled up all the satirical characteristics of the ancients.

Besides the ordinary satirical qualities possessed in common by both the ancients and moderns there is a minor but not unimportant quality found in both. This quality is the picture of the people, of their customs, and of their dress. Just as no historian of early Rome can fail to consult the literary satires of that age if he would present a full picture, so today our cartoons contain so many characteristics peculiar to our age that future historians will turn to them for a clearer picture of the people and their customs. The cartoons in fact present a more concrete picture than any written description can ever do.

Once more then we find that the ancients have helped the modern world to accomplish something worth while. The cartoonists have presented to us a splendid weapon for good. They deserve all the credit they have received. But let us not forget that they too owe much to the ancients.

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Vergil as Poet and Thinker in Latin IV

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(Fourth of four "Friday Conferences on Teaching Latin", at Saint Louis University, in the Summer Session of 1946).

"The chastest poet and royalest, Vergilius Maro, that to the memory of man is known"—this measured tribute by Francis Bacon may well set the theme for a glance at Vergil, viewed as poet and thinker, and offered to young students, traditionally, in Latin IV. And in the high school Latin course Vergil's place is secure. When the *Report of the Classical Investigation*, now almost a quarter-century ago, burst upon the somewhat placid ears of Latin pedagogy, there were some startling conclusions. Caesar was threatened with almost complete expulsion from his time-honored hold upon Latin II. Cicero was by no means undisturbed in Latin III, and many suggestions were made anent an enriching of the content of that year at the expense of the distinguished orator. But a well-nigh universal acquiescence was expressed in favor of a continuation of Vergil in Latin

IV, as the ideal and almost perfect choice for the close of the high school curriculum in Latin.

In the ensuing decades, to be sure, the maelstrom of academic change has more than once ruffled the Neptunian calm of our classic waters; and Vergil, to be taught at all, has sometimes been drawn into Latin III—as a regular place, or, sometimes, as a place in alternate years, where a school has been able to maintain Latin beyond the first four semesters only by combining Latin III and IV and rotating the subject matter from year to year.

Yet, whatever his place, Vergil has so deep and infectious a charm that a reading in his works may well be one of the truly rich and treasured experiences of a high school student's career. In Vergil, if at any point in the secondary curriculum, those human values, that human approach, which in these troubled days we need so increasingly to stress, can surely be stimulated and exemplified.

But to realize them we, as teachers, need from time to time to question our own aesthetic appreciations. "Si vis me flere, dolendumst", says Horace¹, "primum ipsi tibi." If we would handle the writings of Vergil as masterly pieces of poetry, we first must come to love and understand them ourselves—or perhaps to *re-love* and *re-understand*, to *rekindle* first enthusiasms, lost mayhap, or suffered to burn low, in the cares of passing years, or even in a misuse of the very philological aids which, in continuing study, should have served to intensify the early flame.

— 1 —

Vergil, then, had the somewhat unusual experience of being appreciated in his own day and among his own countrymen. Not, to be sure, that he aspired to such public laudation. His biographer, Donatus² tells us that: "... on his rare visits to Rome, if he chanced to be recognized on the streets, he would take refuge in the nearest house from the crowd following him and pointing him out"; and the wondrous and almost surely authentic likeness of him, discovered as the principal panel in a mosaic floor in excavations at Sousse, in Tunisia, in 1896, and dated at about a century after the poet's death, shows him as a man likely to be retiring and shy. Mr. Mackail, in his bimillennial edition,³ reproduces the head of Vergil from this mosaic as a frontispiece and discusses it in his introduction.⁴

Vergil's writings were immediately popular and immediately rated as classics. Donatus tells us⁵ that he had scarcely begun the *Aeneid* when its fame inspired Propertius to declare:

Cedite, Romani scriptores, cedite Grai:
Nescio quid maius nascitur Iliade.

Even before his death his writings became the basis of learned lectures. Suetonius tells us, for example, that the first such lecturer⁶ was Quintus Caecilius Epirota. And there were many others as the years passed—critics hostile and critics friendly; one may find a review of them in the first volume of Conington's three-volume, monumental edition of the poet⁷. But no testimonial to his power can surpass that related, again by Donatus,⁸ who tells us that Vergil read to Octavian the second, fourth, and sixth books of the *Aeneid* on one occasion; and that the sixth book "... had a singular effect upon

Octavia, who was present at the recital; for when the poet came to the line about her son, 'Thou Marcellus shalt be', she is said to have fainted away and to have been revived only with difficulty".

— 2 —

Octavia, to be sure, was a mother grieving over the immature death of a son who had given every promise of a brilliant and beneficent career, whom Augustus had chosen as his own successor and son-in-law, and who then had died at a tragically early age in the year 23 B.C. Yet the magic of the poet's thoughts and words makes Octavia's grief a universal rather than an individual sorrow. She becomes, as it were, the symbol of universal bereaved motherhood. She personifies that long line of stricken women who, through the ages, have seen the children they loved taken from them—by war, by pestilence, by accident, by the wiles of personal foes.

Here, concretely, is a manifestation of the *lacrimae rerum*, "the tears of things", that magic and teeming phrase that Aeneas himself speaks in the first book of the *Aeneid*, as he stands with the faithful Achates before the doors of Dido's new temple in Carthage and sees there the pictured representations of the saga of Troy. A modern poet, Babette Deutsch⁹, beautifully alludes to the phrase in the words:

The tears of things that have not any words,
Deeper than music, stronger than the sea,
And sadder than the flight of homing birds:
Remembered things, outlasting memory.

Life, to be sure, is a thing complex and mysterious; and to the thinking poet Vergil, striving, as he was, to solve its riddles with the unaided tool of reason, striving without that Supernal Light which was soon to come upon the earth announced by angelic voices, the problem was inexplicable, baffling, ineluctable. The profound melancholy that underlies the verses of all the classical poets, Greek and Latin as well, he shared in generous measure; not a melancholy of despair, for he seems convinced that an over-ruling providence will in some way make things right; but a melancholy of puzzlement and helplessness, before the apparent injustices and sadnesses and unnecessary distresses that he beheld on every side.

Such is¹⁰ his "multa putans sortemque animo miseratus iniquam", "thinking much and compassionating in his heart fate's inequalities"; such, too, is¹¹ his "casu concussus iniquo", "dismayed at her unequal doom", spoken by Aeneas in the Netherworld, as he watches the shade of Dido flit silently from him, back to the Plains of Mourning.

There was no answer, he knew, in this world, imperfect and difficult as this world is. But he knew of a fuller life beyond the grave. Poets and philosophers alike had told of it throughout the centuries. Pindar had portrayed it in the Isles of the Blest. Plato had made it the abode of the Ideas substantialized, where the mind might satisfy itself in an ultimate attainment of truth and beauty. The Mystery Cults—Orphism, Eleusis, and others—had kept alive men's hopes. And many another source, high and low as well, encouraged the poet's own natural longings for an abode of deathlessness to replace death, perfection to replace imperfection,

realization to replace hope. And in the light of such thoughts a deeper sense comes to the beautiful lines of the sixth book:¹²

Stabant orantes primi transmittere cursum,
Tendebantque manus ripae ulterioris amore.

A very life of thought and hope and expectation springs into being in the three last words—"ripae ulterioris amore", "with longing for the farther shore". It is not merely the disappointed shades whom the stern charon keeps from his age-old bark on the Styx; no, it is Vergil, with all his hopes and fears; it is universal mankind, inspired by the promptings of immortality, looking to that distant bourne of final peace, of ultimate perfection, of undying felicity.

— 3 —

Perhaps Vergil expresses such thoughts in language and in incidents that are sad in their emphasis rather than hopeful. But we must remember that this is a way of poets. "Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought." And sorrow is by no means the invariable accompaniment of Vergil's longings and hopes. The famous *Fourth Eclogue*, for example, is more than a pretty compliment to Octavian on the expected birth of a child—which, as it chanced, turned out to be a girl and not a boy! No, even though we no longer take it as a "Messianic Eclogue" in the sense that it is a definite pagan prophecy of the birth of Christ, we may legitimately discern in it, too, an expression of man's hopes for a Savior, of man's consciousness of his own guilt, of his expectation that One would come to lift him from his degradation. Truly, then, does the poet himself see something distinctive¹³ in this fourth poem:

Sicelides Musae, paulo maiora canamus.

Even though the riches of the *Aeneid* do not allow us, in high school classes, to read extensively or even at all from the *Eclogues*, we may well, as teachers, return to them from time to time to see the younger Vergil and to observe him at work in a lighter *genre*. He spent three years, we are told, on the ten slight poems of this collection of shepherd verse in the tradition of the Greek Theocritus. Phinias Fletcher has said of the *Eclogues*:¹⁴

Who has not heard the Arcadian shepherd's quires,
Which now have gladly chang'd their native tongue,
And sitting by slow Mincius, spent their fill,
With sweeter voice and never-equalled skill,
Chanting their amorous lays unto a Roman quill?

Nor should we, as teachers, neglect in our Vergilian appreciation the high excellence of the *Georgics*, that didactic work on principles of husbandry in which Vergil so far outshone his professed Greek model, Hesiod, writer of the *Works and Days*. We may well disagree with John Dryden's enthusiastic rating of the *Georgics* as "the best poem of the best poet". But we shall find in these four books, upon which the poet lavished seven years, a wondrous love of the soil, a deep sympathy with Nature in her mysterious processes of growth and nurture, and a preface to that patriotic appreciation of Italy which was to sound again, and more notably, in the imperial theme of the *Aeneid*. Few apostrophies to one's native land can surpass the following address to Italy, coming at the close of a long litany of Italy's advantages:¹⁵

Salve, magna parens frugum, Saturnia tellus,
Magna virum: tibi res antiquae laudis et artis
Ingredior, sanctos ausus recludere fontes
Ascræumque cano Romana per oppida carmen.

— 4 —

But in these brief remarks—which can, obviously, do no more than suggest that Vergil is a poet and thinker, and which must leave almost all the rich ore of the subject unexploited and even unplumbed—we are concerned with Vergil in the high school, and therefore with the *Aeneid*. Is the sort of appreciation we are here suggesting too subtle, too elusive, for the high school student?

Before we agree or disagree, let us recall Horace's *si vis me flere*. An increasingly deeper appreciation of Vergil on the teacher's part is the first essential to a love and understanding of Vergil on the student's part. Young readers, of course, beset with difficulties of vocabulary and syntax, rebelling at the thought of poetry in any language, and distracted by unnumbered interests and concerns outside school hours, will not, as a rule, display an automatic enthusiasm for the Roman poet. But generally they will not display such an automatic love for any of the fine arts or any of the outstanding masterpieces in literary achievement. The inspiring of such enthusiasm is the teacher's task.

Surely the *Aeneid* is replete with events and subjects well within the grasp of high school students. War, dispersal of conquered peoples, high adventure at sea and in new lands, games, the appeal of pleasure as against duty, patriotism, the sense of loyalty to family and dear ones—these are but a few of the outstanding subjects the first six books give us. Here there is much food for thought, much opportunity for equating situations in ancient times with our own, many occasions for pointing out the long continuity of human experience.

And as to Vergil the poet—he is to be found everywhere. The Storm in the first book is a masterpiece of description; so, too, is the Battle of Troy in the second book; or the Incident of the Cyclopes, in the third, to take but a few of the most obvious. These the young student can surely understand. And if some passages he understands but imperfectly, possibly at some later day he will return to them; just as Aeneas himself passed first through darkness before basking, in the sixth book, in the bright light of Elysium. Yet even the half-light has its beauties—suggestions of what is to come, gleams of the effulgence ahead.¹⁶

Ibant obscuri sola sub nocte per umbram,
Perque domos Ditis vacuas et inania regna,
Quale per incertam lunam sub luce maligna
Est iter in silvis, ubi caelum condidit umbra
Iuppiter, et rebus nox abstulit atra colorem.

Such a passage justifies the high encomia Vergil has enjoyed through the centuries—justifies Milton's reference to "the tale of Troy divine"—leaves us with the conviction that when we enter in high school the Vergil classroom we do so as bearers of choice gifts, as dispensers of thought and beauty that are alike imperishable.

¹ *Ars Poetica* 102-103. ² *Vita Vergilii* 11.

³ *The Aeneid: Edited with Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1930).

⁴ Pages xlii-xlvii. ⁵ *Vita Vergilii* 30. ⁶ *De Grammaticis* 16.

⁷ John Conington and Henry Nettleship, *The Works of Vergil*, volume 1, edition 5, revised by F. Haverfield (London, George Bell and Sons, 1898), pages liv-e.

⁸ *Vita Vergilii* 32-33.

⁹ Quoted from *The New Republic*, January 26, 1921, in Elizabeth Nitchie, *Master Vergil* (Boston, D. C. Heath and Company, 1930), p. 30.

¹⁰ *Aeneid* 6.332. ¹¹ *Ibid.* 475. ¹² *Ibid.* 313-314.

¹³ *Eclogues* 4.1.

¹⁴ Quoted in Elizabeth Nitchie, *op. cit.* (note 9), p. 107.

¹⁵ *Georgics* 2. 173-176. ¹⁶ *Aeneid* 6. 268-272.

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Vol. 23

INDEX, 1946-47

No. 9

I. INDEX OF ARTICLES*

- Again, Latin and the Liturgy: *Hugo J. Gerleman* 19
 Aristophanes' Criticism of the Athenian Democracy: *Robert C. Horn* 17
 A.S.T.P.: see What Can Latin Teachers Learn from the A.S.T.P.
 Ave Atque Vale (E): *Charles T. Hunter* 4
 Ball Playing at Rome: *Harry J. Leon* 65
 Book Reviews:
 A Beginning Greek Book (Rife) 43; A Reading Course in Homeric Greek (Schoder and Horrigan) 11; Classical Essays Presented to James A. Kleist, S.J. (Arnold) 29; Coins of the Popes (Coffin) 58; The Epistles of St. Clement of Rome and St. Ignatius of Antioch (Kleist) 10; L'Epoque Mérovingienne: Essai de Synthèse de Philologie et d'Histoire (Muller) 21; Ovid: A Poet Between Two Worlds (Frankel) 37; Potter & Painter in Ancient Athens (Beagely) 37; "Servianorum in Virgilio Carmina Commentariorum Volumen II (Aeneid I-II)" (Meyer) 53; Virgil (Letters) 22
 Caesar: see Interesting Characters met in Latin II
 Call To Arms, A (E): *Charles T. Hunter* 28
 Christian Humanism (E); *Charles T. Hunter* 20
 Classical Books for High School Needs: *J. E. R.* 56
 Classical Literature in Translation?: *William A. Grimaldi* 25
 Democracy: see Aristophanes' Criticism of the Athenian Democracy
 Education: see Modern Educational Trends; What Can Latin Teachers Learn from A.S.T.P.
 Education, Yesterday and Today (E): *Charles T. Hunter* 60
 Field of Medieval Literature, The: *Graydon W. Regenos* 5
 "Folia" (R): 8
 Francis Thompson and Virgil: *John J. Savage* 50
 Greece, The Cultural Bridge between East and West; *Samuel A. B. Mercer* 53
 Greek and Latin Plays: see Shall Our Students perform—
 Humane Tradition, The: *Dean Christian Gauss* 68
 Institute for Classical Studies: *Werner Jaeger* 64
 Interesting Characters Met in Latin II: *Chauncey E. Finch* 23
 Language: see Thoughts on—; also Why Study—
 Functional Language Teaching (E): *Francis A. Preuss* 36
 Liturgy: see Again, Latin and the Liturgy
 Post-War Education (E): *Francis A. Preuss* 52
 Lucky Archaeological Find, A: *Rudolph Arbesmann* 9
 Mediaeval Latin Program for Easter, A: *D. A. McKenzie* 49
 Mediaeval Literature: see Field of Mediaeval Literature, The
 Meeting the Romans—in Latin I: *William C. Korfmacher* 13
 Modern Educational Trends (E): *Francis A. Preuss* 12
 Monica, Saint: see Lucky Archaeological Find, A
 More on Classical Education (E): *Charles T. Hunter*
 New Vein for Fable, A: *Charles Sanford Rayment* 41
 Old Wine in New Bottles: The New Latin Translation of the Psalms: *M. Joseph Costelloe* 61
 Ovid: see Protesilaus, A-9224689 also Book Reviews
 Pericles and Democracy: *Patrick A. Sullivan* 59
 Phaedrus: see New Vein for Fable, A
 Protesilaus, A-9224689 (Trojan Expeditionary Forces): *George Twigg-Porter* 37
 Religion of the Ancient Atomists, The: *Clyde Murley* 45
 Roman Personality: see Meeting the Romans in Latin I
 Roswitha and Terence: *John Francis Abbick* 31
 Scientific Warfare, Seneca, and a Psalm: *William Hardy Alexander* 56
 Semi-annual Report of the Institute for Classical Studies: 5
 Seneca: see Scientific Warfare—and a Psalm
 Seneca and Mr. Churchill: *Leo M. Kaiser* 11
 Shall Our Students Perform Greek and Latin Plays?: *A. M. Withers* 42

- Terence: see Roswitha and—
 Thoughts on Language: *A. M. Withers* 22
 Translation: see Classical Literature in—
 Translation of the Psalms: see Old Wine in New Bottles:—
 Trojan Expeditionary Forces: see Protesilaus—
 View of Old Age in Roman Drama, The: *P. R. Coleman-Norton* 33
 Virgil as Poet and Thinker in Latin IV: *William C. Korfmacher* 69
 Virgil's Pageant of Heroes: *Francis A. Sullivan* 15
 Virgil's Use of the Prefix Cum: *Francis A. Sullivan* 34
 What Can Latin Teachers Learn from the A.S.T.P.: *Mark E. Hutchinson* 1
 Why Study Language?: *Lester M. Prindle* 57

II. INDEX OF CONTRIBUTORS

- Abbick, John Francis, S.J.: *Roswitha and Terence* 31
 Alexander, William Hardy: *Scientific Warfare, Seneca, and a Psalm* 56
 Arbesmann, Rudolph, O.S.A.: *A Lucky Archaeological Find* 9
 Carroll, John P., S.J.: *The Epistles of Saint Clement of Rome and Saint Ignatius of Antioch* (R) 10
 Coleman-Norton, P. R.: *The View of Old Age in Roman Drama* 33
 Cooper, Lane: *Classical Essays Presented to James A. Kleist, S.J.* (R) 29
 Costelloe, M. Joseph, S.J.: *Old Wine in New Bottles: The New Latin Translation of the Psalms* 61
 Finch, Chauncey E.: *A Beginning Greek Book* (R) 43; *Interesting Characters Met in Latin II* 23
 Gauss, Dean Christian: *The Humane Tradition* 68
 Gerleman, Hugo J., S.J.: *Again, Latin and the Liturgy* 19
 Grimaldi, William A., S.J.: *Classical Literature in Translation* 25
 Hoogstraet, A. F., S.J.: *Ovid: A Poet Between Two Worlds* (R) 37
 Horn, Robert C.: *Aristophanes' Criticism of the Athenian Democracy* 17
 Hunter, Charles T., S.J.: *Ave Atque Vale* (E) 4; *Call To Arms* (E) 28; *Christian Humanism* (E) 20; *Education, Yesterday and Today* (E) 60
 Hutchinson, Mark E.: *What Can Latin Teachers Learn from the A.S.T.P.?* 1
 Jaeger, Werner: *Institute for Classical Studies* 64
 Jaffee, Harold B.: *A Reading Course in Homeric Greek* (R) 11
 Kaiser, Leo M.: *Seneca and Mr. Churchill* 11
 Korfmacher, William Charles: *Meeting the Romans in Latin I* 13; *Virgil as Poet and Thinker in Latin IV* 69
 Manning, Robert E., S.J.: *Coins of the Popes* (R) 58
 McKenzie, D. A.: *A Mediaeval Latin Program for Easter* 49
 Mercer, Samuel A. B.: *Greece, the Cultural Bridge Between East and West* 53
 Meyer, Robert T.: *L'Epoque Mérovingienne: Essai de Synthèse de Philologie et d'Histoire* (R) 21; *Servianorum in Virgilio Carmina Commentariorum Volumen II* (R) 53
 Murley, Clyde: *The Religion of the Ancient Atomists* 45
 Pendergast, Joseph S., S.J.: *Virgil* (R) 22
 Preuss, Francis A., S.J.: *Functional Language Teaching* (E) 37; *Post-War Education* (E) 52; *Modern Educational Trends* (E) 12; *Potter and Painter in Ancient Athens* (R) 37
 Prindle, Lester M.: *Why Study Language?* 57
 Rohrer, J. E., S.J.: *Classical Books for High School Needs* 56
 Rayment, Charles Sanford: *A New Vein for Fable* 41
 Regenos, Graydon W.: *The Field of Medieval Literature* 5
 Savage, John J.: *Francis Thompson and Virgil* 50
 Sullivan, Francis A., S.J.: *Virgil's Pageant of Heroes* 15; *Virgil's Use of the Verbal Prefix Cum* 34
 Sullivan, Patrick A., S.J.: *Pericles and Democracy* 59; *Ancient Satires to Modern Cartoons* 68
 Twigg-Porter, George, S.J.: *(Trojan Expeditionary Forces)* 37
 Withers, A. M.: *Shall Our Students Perform Greek and Latin Plays?* 42; *Thoughts on Language* 22

* P = Poem; R = Review; E = Editorial

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